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Small form films: the (non-)cinema of Mike Ott

By Robert Campbell

Since graduating from the California Institute of the Arts, where he studied, *inter alia*, under Thom Andersen and James Benning, Mike Ott has prolifically been making feature films as well as shorts and music videos on tiny budgets. Indeed, he has shot seven features in little over a decade, including

- his graduation film *Analog Days* (2006),
- the documentary *Kid Icarus* (with Carl Bird McLaughlin, 2008),
- a series of three films called *LiTTLEROCK* (2010), *Pearblossom Hwy* (2012) and *Lake Los Angeles* (2014), which are referred to collectively as the Antelope Valley trilogy,
- *Actor Martinez* (with Nathan Silver, USA, 2016) and
- *California Dreams* (2017).

Between them, these films have won various awards, including at the Montréal Festival of New Cinema, the Cleveland International Film Festival, the AFI Fest and the Independent Spirit Awards. *LiTTLEROCK*, *Pearblossom Hwy*, *Lake Los Angeles* and *Actor Martinez* are all available on Amazon Video/Amazon Prime, while *LiTTLEROCK* is also distributed on DVD by Kino Lorber, and *Actor Martinez* by Breaking Glass Pictures. A short, *Lancaster, CA* (2015), was in 2016 distributed on MUBI. Meanwhile, at time of writing *California Dreams* continues its festival run after premiering as part of the Critics' Week at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2017 and having its first screening in North America at the SXSW Film Festival in March —with esteemed film critic Richard Brody also naming *Actor Martinez* among his top films of 2017 in *The New Yorker*.[1] [open notes in new window]

Making films set in locales about fifty miles from Hollywood, Ott uses the film industry and Hollywood style as an implicit reference in most of his films, but primarily in the sense that his own style is in a way counter-Hollywood. In addition, not being in Hollywood and not being "cinematic" have a metaphoric resonance across his work. His style is such that although he is prolific, having made numerous feature fictions, his films are largely unknown. His scripts are unobtrusively intellectual, usually wandering, and often emotional. He encourages fine acting from performers whom he uses repeatedly in his work, but does not give them the typically tight story arcs found in Hollywood scripts; rather, actors play out meandering narratives and often have speeches that seem to come from their own lives. As he puts it, he makes "small form films."

Ott's films typically tell the story of disaffected young men and women who have aspirations to leave their homes and achieve success, often in the movies. However, Ott's protagonists regularly find themselves hampered by a combination of circumstances, including most often apathy, lack of talent, and geography. More important, nearly all are marginalized by their low income, meaning that Ott's films present an opposition between labor/the need to work and cinema/a desire to "be cinematic." This opposition is often played out through characters' use of different media, including audio cassette and VHS video tapes, computers and videogames, and especially letter writing—all of which contrast to the characters' talking about wanting to be in movies. The narrative decision to follow characters who aspire to cinema but regularly settle for other "lesser" media can be read as deliberate, given the name of Ott's production company, Small Form Films.

Ott clearly places his work within an expansive history of cinema, making allusions and intertextual references to it within his films. But he also eschews spectacular narrative for an engagement with the mundane, unresolved and overlooked. Ott in this way embraces "small form." On the level of style and also narrative theme, his films constitute a different, perhaps even "non-cinematic" type of film, one in which unconventional, imperfect and makeshift families replace the cinematic mainstream of families with strong fathers and beautiful lovers. In addition, these films mostly play out against the desert backdrop of Antelope Valley; that location is fifty or so miles north of Hollywood but remains conceptually further from cinema than its geographical proximity to cinema's capital might suggest.

In embracing "small form," Ott does not offer "new media" as a "more democratic" alternative to cinema. Rather he suggests that cinema and/as the American way of life is in tension with the non-cinematic, which Ott paradoxically renders cinematic through his (digital) filmmaking practice. To say that more simply, Ott's cinema engages with ongoing issues of class in the contemporary United States. He uses the feature fiction medium against itself as a tool to critique the structuring role that media with "high production values" play in the U.S. class system. In people's lives, socially and imaginatively, to "become cinematic" is to have a better life. Fiction film, especially from Hollywood, is partially responsible for planting "cinematic aspirations" in viewers while demonstrating to them how their own lives are not cinematic. Hollywood presents itself as a would-be escape from class difference while simultaneously being a medium that reinforces it. Thus as Ott turns to creating a "small form," or perhaps even a non-cinema, he makes work that is both formally and thematically rich so that his is a rare if fragile voice in the U.S. fiction film landscape.

Film at the margins

The following is an episode that demonstrates the small scale of one protagonist's life and also Ott's playing with intertextual cinematic reference. At the end of *California Dreams*, protagonist Cory (played by regular Ott actor, Cory Zacharia) gets into a taxi to catch a flight to Germany to be in a movie directed by real-world filmmaker Henning Gronkowski. (Gronkowski plays himself in Ott's film though we only hear his voice over

the phone; his forthcoming *Jung* (2018) is produced in real life by Mike Ott.) Driving the taxi is Mark Borchardt, a real-life horror filmmaker who is also at the center of Chris Smith's cult documentary, *American Movie* (1999). As Cory explains that he is off to Germany to make a movie, we hear the taxi driver talk enthusiastically about German filmmakers from Volker Schlöndorff to Wim Wenders, and from Rainer Maria Fassbinder to Werner Herzog. "Werner Hertz-dog?" replies Cory, seemingly oblivious to the New German precursors of his future boss Gronkowski.

I interpret this sequence as would-be star Cory's dream. Elsewhere in *California Dreams*, having been offered a part in Gronkowski's film, Cory summarily fails to raise the $800 or $900 that would get him to Europe, but as the film nears its climax he miraculously finds money strewn across the desert. Since his taxi ride is thus funded by this miracle money, the scene with Borchardt seems a fantasy – a paradoxically cinematic fantasy that masks Cory's failure to "become cinematic" by being in Gronkowski's movie. That is, Cory may not know who his taxi driver is at the end of this film, but Ott surely does. And Ott's casting Borchardt in that role is key, for Borchardt in Chris Smith's documentary is shown as a filmmaker spending every last penny he has on putting together shoestring horror movies in and around Milwaukee. Borchardt is himself, then, a filmmaker associated with the idea of finding affirmation and/or validation in being or "becoming cinematic," even though Smith's film hilariously charts how Borchardt quixotically sets out on this quest with barely a clue and perhaps more courage than talent. Cory is in this way an unwitting successor to Borchardt; he aspires to become cinematic, but he is always an outsider to it.

As we shall see, Ott's films regularly use these kinds of intertextual cinematic references (with *Kid Icarus* as a whole being something of a sister film to *American Movie*). The references add thematic depth and richness to his work and mark him as a focused cinephile director. However, using Borchardt as a character not only has thematic relevance to a plot also about a young man, Cory, seeking to be or to become "cinematic." Using Borchardt also lets Ott situate his own work within the landscape of contemporary U.S. and international filmmaking. It is not that Ott follows Borchardt's genre or style, but they do have something in common, in that Ott is something of an outsider to U.S. cinema – and unlike Borchardt perhaps wilfully so. Indeed, Ott is situated on the margins of even independent cinema, including the so-called mumblecore movement.

In fact, there are many commonalities between mumblecore and Ott's work. Yannis Tzioumakis summarizes, for example, how

> "only a handful [of mumblecore films have] secured theatrical distribution by one of the established distributors, and yet the majority have had substantial presence in some ancillary markets and alternative distribution outlets."[2]

This kind of distribution strategy holds true of Ott's work, which plays at selected festivals before relying primarily on ancillary markets to find audiences. Furthermore, Ott's films to a certain extent resemble mumblecore by virtue of budget and theme. They are

> "low-budget, digitally filmed feature films made by young, white, urban filmmakers about that privileged demographic's struggles to find lasting personal relationships."[3]

Indeed, *LiTTLEROCK*, *Pearblossom Hwy*, *Actor Martinez* and *California Dreams* all focus at least in part on single men looking for lasting personal relationships. In mumblecore films, as Aymar Jean Christian has defined a typical plotline, white male protagonists search for love and "the real."[4] What is more, Ott's films also share a concern for poverty with mumblecore, which Maria San Filippo defines as a "cinema of recession."[5]

However, in other respects Ott's work differs in key ways from mumblecore. First, with the exception of *Actor Martinez*, which takes place in Denver, Ott's locales are not urban but rather set in the Californian desert. Second, only some of his films use a plot of the lonely male looking for love. On the one hand, repeatedly we see actor Cory Zacharia (called Cory as a character) looking for love in *LiTTLEROCK*, *Pearblossom Hwy* and *California Dreams*. In a similar vein, but not about love, *Actor Martinez* also features a would-be professional actor (Arthur Martinez) exploring his loneliness; in the plotline he acts in a film in which he plays a would-be professional actor exploring his loneliness as he acts in a film. But *LiTTLEROCK* is more about the pilgrimage being made by two Japanese siblings (played by Atsuko Okatsuka and Rintaro Sawamoto) to Manzanar, where their grandfather was interned as a prisoner of war during the Second World War. In fact, neither *Pearblossom Hwy* nor *California Dreams* feature Cory falling in love so much as learning in the first film to get along with his ex-marine brother, Jeff (John Brotherton), and developing a friendship/platonic romance (or "plomance") with Japanese American woman Atsuko (referred often to as Anna, and played again by Atsuko Okatsuka). In *California Dreams*, he really develops no romantic relationships (although he flirts briefly with a woman at an acting workshop) even if he talks explicitly and at length about love and sex with various different people, including Asian American Patrick (Patrick Llaguno). In the complexity of his narratives, then, Ott is at pains to expand the world depicted beyond that of the white middle class male that defines mumblecore and to explore a much more racially diverse set of characters.

Indeed, although he never explicitly identifies himself as such, even Arthur in *Actor Martinez* is recognizable from his family name as coming from a Hispanic background, a milieu that is explicitly developed in *Lake Los Angeles*, which tells the story of illegal immigrants coming to California from Mexico, Cuba and other places south of the border. In its exploration of race, as well as in its exploration not simply of a newly-precarious white *bourgeoisie* but of a more precarious, multi-racial working class, Ott's cinema goes much deeper than mumblecore into the theme of "recession," signaling a deeper economic crisis in the 2010s than that depicted in the first mumblecore films of the 2000s.

While Ott's films flirt with the tropes of hip masculinity that David Church identifies in both *Bellflower* (Evan Glodell, USA, 2011) and in mumblecore films as a whole, Ott's characters are either critiqued for their desire to find "authenticity" in the "retro" or his characters use "retro" technology because it is all that they have.[6] In *LiTTLEROCK*, for example, Jordan (Brett L. Tinnes) seduces Atsuko through his hipster use of cassette tapes before turning out to be a cynical womanizer, while in *California Dreams*, Henning shouts at Cory for sending him an audition tape on VHS, even though it is the only technology that Cory has to provide Henning the performance that the latter needs in order to show Cory's acting chops to his producers. In addition, whereas Jordan and his friends Brody (Ryan Dillon), Garbo (Matthew Fling) and Marques (Markiss McFadden) come and go from Littlerock and drive cars, Cory in *LiTTLEROCK*, *Pearblossom Hwy* and in

California Dreams must generally walk everywhere, with a BMX representing for Cory a genuine mode of transport as opposed to the hipster, retro leisure vehicle that it does for Jordan. In other words, Jordan is a "retro" hipster out of choice (and his performance gets him the girl), while Cory uses outmoded technologies out of necessity (and is punished for it).

Rather than figuring simply a hipster *performance* of poverty, then, Ott's films seem more genuinely to explore poverty, or what Anna Backman Rogers might with reference to contemporary U.S. independent cinema call the "crisis image," one of people who are excluded from and who remain invisible to mainstream society. As Backman Rogers suggests,

> "when you are not seen (when you are not rendered as 'surface'), you cease to exist altogether."[7]

This idea that being seen means existing chimes with Jonathan Beller's argument that the contemporary workings of capital are *cinematic*. As Beller suggests, under capitalism only that which attracts our attention is considered real, and that reality is then defined by the possibility of turning attention into profit. The techniques that are used to attract attention are the same techniques as those developed in cinema. As a result, cinema becomes the measure of capital, which in turn becomes the measure of reality: if you are not seen, or if you are not profitable, then you cease to exist.[8]

In this respect, the increasing visibility of mumblecore directors like Joe Swanberg, Greta Gerwig, Lena Dunham and Jay and Mark Duplass signals the way in which the precarity and soul-searching seen in mumblecore films are indeed privileged and in some respects the acceptable, "cinematic" face of crisis. Ott's films and the world(s) that they depict, meanwhile, remain significantly recessed from view. Not only has Ott *stayed out* of the mainstream, unlike the mumblecore directors mentioned above, but he seems to reject the mainstream, as per the dialogue of *Actor Martinez* where Mike (Ott playing himself) discusses with Arthur and co-director Nathan (Silver, also playing himself) how they do not want to make their film "marketable." Small wonder that after having left Antelope Valley to make *Actor Martinez*, Ott returned home to make *California Dreams*, a much more modest project.

Ott deliberately keeps his cinema "small," as might be implied by his regular collaboration with David Nordstrom, who edited *Kid Icarus*, *LiTTLEROCK* and *Pearblossom Hwy*, before going on to edit Adam Rifkin's *Giuseppe Makes a Movie* (2014), a documentary about radical trailer park filmmaker Giuseppe Andrews. Like Andrews, Ott works on the margins of cinema, in a realm even where cinema stops being itself and paradoxically but necessarily becomes non-cinema—necessarily because this is not a cinema made for money nor intending to make money. Ott's films are not amateur (and certainly not amateurish, even if they feature many non-professional actors). A non-capitalist project, Ott's films also critique the workings of contemporary capitalism. His is non-cinema.[9]

As a possible further marker of his outsider status in contemporary U.S. cinema, we might look at how *Pearblossom Hwy* was produced and *Lake Los Angeles* executive-produced by Athina Rachel Tsangari, whose contributions to the Greek "weird wave" take the form both of her own films *Attenberg* (2010) and *Chevalier* (2015), and those of director Yorgos Lanthimos, whose *Kinetta* (2005), *Kynodontas/Dogtooth* (2009) and *Alpeis/Alps* (2011) she produced and/or associate-produced. All these films trace the underside of the European Union in crisis-hit Greece. So, too, do Ott's film trace the underside of the United States now equally in crisis. Far from being a cinema in which hipsters seemingly never have to work, as per mumblecore and *Bellflower*, Ott's films involve much work and/or searching for work in a bid to survive, with his characters' dreams of and attempts at "becoming cinema" marking not so much their privilege as precisely their outsider status in relation to mainstream "cinematic" society.

If mumblecore indicates a kind of gentrification of poverty, loser-dom and hipness, its exploitative performance of poverty can ultimately be accused of complicity with rather than a critique of neoliberal capital. In contrast, Ott offers a deeper and more pointed critique of contemporary U.S. society than mumblecore does by dealing specifically in his films with film's social role (capitalist society as cinematic) as well as by regularly investigating a more clearly lower class milieu. This is true especially in *Lake Los Angeles*, where Ott focuses on illegal immigrant workers who are otherwise "not seen" and thus usually "non-existent" to the world of cinema-capital. Outside of representation, Ott's characters seek often-imperfect and/or quasi-obsolete ways to represent themselves, including via smartphone, VHS cameras and in writing. In fact, Ott's characters understand the importance of and need for images, as is fitting for someone who studied under Andersen, director of *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003). Without families, Ott's characters forge makeshift and imperfect bonds with the unlikely others whom they encounter. Without transport, they catch rides and/or move at a pedestrian rate.

Walking through the desert, characters become fused with the landscape rather than experiencing nature simply as a backdrop (perhaps fitting from a former student of James Benning, the director of numerous movies that explore relations between landscape and cinema). Being in and of the desert, Ott's characters, like his films more generally, signal the growing emptiness that surrounds cinema and capital alike, suggesting an alternative world in which alternative bonds and relationships must be made as his characters do not perform struggle but struggle to survive, even as they want impossibly to be or to become mainstream/cinematic so as not to have to struggle at all. That is, Ott reveals in his very self-consciously cinematic films that cinema itself is an illusion that allows us to pretend to escape from the desert of the real. In an era of economic and ecological crisis, in which the desert literally grows all around us, Ott's films in this sense present us not just with images of an American present that otherwise lies outside of mainstream representation, but perhaps also a vision of the United States' and the world's future.

As per most of Ott's movies, his debut *Analog Days* deals with a group of youth, here in Newhall, a town which like Littlerock, Lake Los Angeles, and Lancaster lies about thirty miles outside of Los Angeles. In Ott's words it is "not exactly a real city."[10] The main group of characters are disaffected and have no interest in politics until one of them, Tammy (Ivy Khan), begins to document with her camcorder violence towards migrants around there. If her images bring with them a sense of political awakening, it is perhaps significant that these images are digital. Gone are the "analog days" in which one dreamt that life would work out like in the movies. Here instead are the days are digital, and deeply political in nature. Ott's "small form" cinema as well is politically nuanced in its digital construction, suggesting a "minor cinema" in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's sense of the word. Within the Californian context his minor cinema traces experiences of minority

populations, particularly Latinos, as he also explores in *Lake Los Angeles*.[11] Before looking in more detail at that film and the rest of Ott's *œuvre*, though, let us start with a consideration of *Kid Icarus*, Ott's often hilarious documentary about student filmmakers, who see cinema as a means of escape from their otherwise non-cinematic lives.

Kid Icarus

Ott's second feature is primarily about Leigh Harkrider, a student at the College of the Canyons, a community college in Valencia, another small town about 25 miles due north of Hollywood where Ott was teaching filmmaking. Leigh is a cocksure young man certain he'll have a glittering career in filmmaking. He's constantly referencing and borrowing production "tricks," such as drinking sparkling wine at the beginning of a shoot, from Steven Spielberg as he sets about making *Enslavence* (Leigh Harkrider, 2009)—a short film about a troubled drug addict (Crystal Rivers) who is haunted by a small boy who could be a figment of her imagination. The production faces amusing problems, including a disorganized crew, refrigerator buzzing on location, an aggrieved screenwriter seeking an authorship credit, and Leigh's generally inept social skills. In short, Leigh has no idea how to direct a film, and *Enslavence* suffers as a result. *Kid Icarus*, on the other hand, benefits enormously from these problems as it presents to us a catalog of filmmaking errors, such that we have a (problematically) comic documentary along the lines of Smith's portrait of Borchardt and his sidekick Mike Schank in *American Movie*.

Kid Icarus is problematic because it makes Leigh ridiculous as he fails to listen to the advice of others, including his instructor Ott, while his *Enslavence* shoot goes near-disastrously wrong (the film does get completed). As the film's title implies, Leigh suffers from his arrogance, but *Kid Icarus* is also comic and tender, partly because of the actors with whom Leigh works—several of whom have gone on to feature in Ott's subsequent films, including Cory Zacharia, a camp and exuberant man who here develops a crush on make-up artist Gianna Luisi, and Atsuko Okatsuka, a novice cinematographer whom Leigh drafts at the last minute. Also among the film's subjects are disgruntled writer Carlo Chavez, who has the air of being permanently stoned; rejected boom operator Corey Rubin, whose fidelity to Leigh is spurned at every opportunity; and Paul Zeigler, a gruff 54-year old student who revels in telling Leigh how unprofessional he is, while at the same time smoking dope in his car during filming.

In some senses, the film might seem cruel, in that these characters often come across as stupid, as they don't pay attention and make mistakes on set, make awkward conversation (Cory hitting on Gianna, for example), or talk authoritatively about matters with which they have little familiarity (e.g., Leigh knows little to nothing about heroin culture, even though it forms a central aspect of his film). At the same, Ott and co-director Carl Bird McLaughlin allow their characters also to express insecurity. Granted, some of these insecurities come across as disingenuous, in that Leigh and Cory often revel in self-pity (Leigh: "I've really been much of a loner and loser for quite a bit of my life"; Cory: "I guess I just get overly sad, or scared or… I feel like no one really wants me, I feel just so alone and so empty all the time"). However, since such self-pity is often typical of young adults, then the intimacy that Ott achieves with his subjects leads to remarkable results as Ott's subjects open up about their own experiences, attitudes, and feelings.

For example, early on, Leigh says that "nobody wants to be nobody" as he stands in long shot on his phone in the dark outside the trailer park home where he lives. We learn later that this is his friend's mother's house. In other words, Leigh does not live with his family but in other, temporary lodging. Although he seems more invested in playing videogames and in watching *Smallville* (2001-2011) than in doing his school work, he repeatedly avows that education is important to him, since it might help him to get out of The Home Depot where he also works. In his own words: "I'm destined for greater things, I think, than pushing carts." What those "greater things" are is not certain, although Leigh does want to work in the film industry. As he says at the start of the film, in a scene that is also repeated towards the end:

> "I guess I'm trying to be something that I'm not, and I can't face the fact that I'm not what I want to be. And truth is, I probably don't know what I want to be. I know I want to be a filmmaker. But I don't know what I personally want to be, like I guess I need to go on that life journey in order to find out who I really am, and, er, I guess I don't want to take that journey, I just want to get straight to it."

In other words, Leigh does not know what he wants to be, but he wants to be successful, and his understanding of success is clearly associated with cinema and/or with becoming cinematic.

As Leigh says he is scared of being "nobody," Ott and McLaughlin's documentary takes on a poetic quality. We see Leigh shrouded in darkness outside his home, speaking into the glow of his cellphone. Outside of a home that is neither his nor permanent, Leigh is threatened by the invisibility of non-existence—the darkness that surrounds him—and he uses technology, his phone, to try to connect with others. His quasi-futile desire to make films affirms that cinema is his measure of reality, and that many people do not feel that their lives are real—even in the suburbs of Hollywood itself—unless those lives are indeed cinematic. Read psychoanalytically, Leigh's *Enslavence* expresses his own addiction—not to drugs but to media (gaming, *Smallville*), and his own desire to resist enslavement to a system that might indeed see him "pushing carts" for the rest of his life.[12]

Leigh wants to be cinematic, but in a manner that recalls Vilém Flusser's idea that it is "difficult to decipher [and by extension to produce meaningful] technical images, because they are apparently in no need of being deciphered." He does not realize that making films is not as easy as seeing films, just as making money via work is not as easy or addictive as taking on debt.[13] We could blame Leigh for being lazy; but more subtly he is symptomatic of the powerlessness and the temptation of ease that characterize the image consumer and debt. In other words, *Kid Icarus* suggests that consuming images one does not create comes from and contributes to the stranglehold that neoliberal capital has on the contemporary world via debt. Images, like debt, are all-pervasive. And not to be seen is not to exist; to be seen, or to make images, one must either be rich or one must accrue debt.

Yet, while *Enslavence* is in many respects a terrible film—partly because Leigh seeks less to make a film than to "become cinematic" (i.e. rich and famous, the object of attention)—in other respects it is important in both *Kid Icarus*' plot and themes. Although Leigh wants *Enslavence* to be a commercial success (he regularly compares it to David Fincher's *Fight Club*, 1999), its use in Ott's film lies in how poorly it mimics mainstream

cinema; we are asked to pay attention to precisely its imperfections. The very title of Leigh's film, a meaningless word not in the dictionary, suggests his linguistic ineptitude. More than that, it makes mainstream cinematic language "stutter" in a manner that recalls Deleuze and Guattari's belief in the importance of the "minor" (or what Ott terms the "small form"). That is, the very ineptitude of the title *Enslavence* subverts the unthinking logic of the major "discourse," in which rules and correctness (having a dictionary definition) are accepted as the limits of an exclusive reality. Reality is thus aesthetic as much as it is political: only words in the dictionary are accepted as real worlds, just as only "good" films (with high production values) are accepted as real films, and just as only cinematic humans are accepted as real humans. But why should this be so?

Clearly Leigh does not/will not become rich or famous—and indeed he tries to deprive his collaborators, especially Carlo, of any rights to any potential future success that *Enslavence* may or may not achieve. But almost in spite of himself, he makes friends where previously he had none. That is, if Leigh is someone without a family, by the end of the film he has a makeshift family that gathers and has fun at the wrap party; it's a family forged through the very act of filmmaking itself. As Leigh himself puts it:

> "I've really been much of a loner and loser for quite a bit of my life, and, er, this whole bunch of people, it's like a really new experience, I mean I've never really had 15 people around me at one time."

In other words, while he may not have produced a film worthy of cinema, the non-cinematic or "bad" aspects of *Enslavence*, explored in *Kid Icarus*, ironically also help to build authentic relationships. As a person, Leigh realizes that he is not a detached observer, or a consumer both of images and of other people, but an entangled participant in the world, a human being who can have friends and who thus is not alone. Perhaps his very failure to make a "real" film lets Leigh manage to create more real relationships.

The title *Kid Icarus* refers to the Greek myth, in which Icarus flies too close to the sun, melting the wax binding together the feathers on the prosthetic wings that his father Daedalus has made, thereby causing Icarus to plunge to his death as he tries to escape from Crete. The myth's implied lesson is to warn against excessive ambition. Here, I should like to challenge that reading, not least because of the addition of the word "kid" to the title. For it's normal that young people be (overly) ambitious, make mistakes, and fail; it is in sharing such experiences that real relationships are forged.

If Leigh denies his failures as a human (that to be human is to fail), then *Kid Icarus* the film conversely demonstrates that failure is okay, that it is in many respects good, and that we should not be afraid of it. In our society the cinematic is so bound up with success, that life becomes not something that one simply experiences but something that one either wins or loses. In this context, failure becomes non-cinematic but also profoundly human. While *Enslavence* might thus be rated by many as "bad" from an aesthetic perspective, *Kid Icarus* shows us how cinema can include its own rejections and failures.

A final consideration remains whether *Kid Icarus* is condescending to Leigh and thus perhaps unethical. However, while Ott personally criticizes Leigh at various points in the film, especially for not listening, *Kid Icarus* is itself a film that documents and plays a part in forming the kind of community that Leigh enjoys at his wrap party. Indeed, that Ott is Leigh's instructor suggests the beneficial role that pedagogy can play in creating communities, or ersatz families, even if this runs counter to the supposedly cinematic-capitalist ethos of individualism. With Leigh and others often hooked up to a radio mic, it is clear that he has consented to be in Ott and McLaughlin's film, and that the film is not so much detached observation as in many respects participatory and performative. Indeed, at times it seems as though the film must have been scripted, so unbelievable does it seem that someone would willingly look that silly (or like a failure) on camera. It is not the aim here to determine what is staged and what is not, but rather to argue that this very ambiguity between the two suggests an entanglement of subject and filmmaker.

The film is comic, in that one regularly laughs, but this is not a condescending laughter born out of a sense of superiority to the performers, but rather a laughter born out of a sense of kinship with the film's subjects and their frail insecurities. That is, comedy here becomes a process of reaffirming with-ness (co-medy), not condescending separation; it is part of the process of community building. Leigh is not a buffoon that we laugh at; rather we all see bits of Leigh in ourselves, and we see ourselves in Leigh. In other words, Ott and McLaughlin do not just take part in building a community that we see in the film; *Kid Icarus* itself also invites us to join the community, with film thus functioning as a means for building communities itself. This community-building is confirmed when we understand that Zacharia and Okatsuka have both gone on to star in *LiTTLEROCK* and *Pearblossom Hwy*, with Zacharia then appearing in *Lake Los Angeles* (in a brief cameo), *Lancaster, CA* and *California Dreams*, and Okatsuka co-writing *Lake Los Angeles*. In other words, Ott does not just exploit a community college for his own purposes, but is involved in the building of precisely a community, such that he has continued to work with the same people since. While Leigh compares himself to Superman, Cory wears in the film a t-shirt with the logo "I'm like a superhero with no powers or motivation." While Leigh learns humbly to accept his humanity (via some humiliation), perhaps it is no surprise that Zacharia's already human and specifically un-superhuman qualities make him of continuing interest to Ott in his subsequent work, as we shall now explore in relation to *LiTTLEROCK*, the first in the so-called Antelope Valley trilogy.

LiTTLEROCK

As mentioned, *LiTTLEROCK* tells the story of a Japanese brother and sister who get stranded in the titular town, again about 40 miles north of Los Angeles. Although she does not speak English, the sister Atsuko stays on in Littlerock after her brother Rintaro has left, mainly because of her interest in Jordan, although she is clearly also the object of Cory's attention, with whom she eventually forms an unlikely friendship. Although in part about the lack of things to do in small-town California, and while referencing migrant labor, particularly through the character of kitchen worker Francisco (Roberto Sanchez), the film also culminates in a visit by Rintaro and Atsuko (now reunited) to the Manzanar Internment Camp, where the US government held captive roughly 110,000 Japanese-Americans during World War Two. Using non-professional actors and made on a budget that Mike Hale of *The New York Times* describes as "out of pocket," *LiTTLEROCK* is concerned with conveying a history of California that is seldom repeated and a present of California that lies beyond the typical purview of cinema.[14]

After initial shots of passing desert landscape, the film opens with Atsuko and Rintaro getting off a bus and wondering whether they are in the right place, perhaps because where they are does not seem to be a place at all. As Atsuko explains in a voice over that narrates a letter written to her father, their car has broken down and they need to wait two days for it to be repaired. They visit a shop where they look at photos/postcards featuring Native Americans and Wild West trinkets, before checking into a motel, where, unable to sleep, first Rintaro and then Atsuko join a party taking place next door. Here they meet Cory, who welcomes them and who introduces them to "American" rituals such as shotgunning cans of beer, as well as to his friends, including Sean Tippy, whom viewers of *Kid Icarus* may recognize as Sean Neff from that film. The next day, Cory takes Atsuko and Rintaro to the Devil's Punchbowl, a sandstone formation on the edge of the Angeles National Forest, where he explains that his mother is dead, before we then see them hanging out by the railroad. A freight train passes before Cory explains that he wants to be a model and an actor, performing a would-be runway walk as he does so.

The latter moment is important for a couple of reasons. In showing us the passing train, the scene recalls the Lumière brothers' first film, *Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat/Arrival of the Train* (1896). Except that where the Lumières' train stops and we see passengers disembarking, here the train just passes by. In other words, if the train signals cinema, this sequence suggests that cinema has bypassed Littlerock and Cory alike. Being outside of cinema or invisible, and also without a complete family, Cory here announces that he wants to be visible as a model or an actor, i.e. that he aspires to be cinematic. His failure to be so, however, is compounded in the next scene when we discover that Cory owes money to Brody, i.e. Cory is broke, with Brody, Garbo and Marques also marking Cory as outside of mainstream society by bullying him for being gay (even though Cory claims that he is not). Cory's humiliation is finalized as it is here that Atsuko also meets Jordan, with the two demonstrating a mutual interest in each other.

That night, Jordan hits on Atsuko at a party by Garbo's trailer, which abuts a military weapons range, as Brody hassles Cory once again for not paying back his money. Jordan invites Atsuko, who only speaks Japanese, for a bike ride, with Cory joining them the next day as they head out to the desert and drink by an abandoned shack. Atsuko goes through Jordan's satchel and begins to listen to a cassette that he has made entitled "Limerence," before Cory leaves them together because of a shift that he must work at his father's diner. In other words, Jordan seduces Atsuko through his hipster style (his easy good looks and brush-over hair, the satchel, the cassette tape and the bikes), while Cory cannot form such a "cinematic" relationship because he is in debt to Brody and because, unlike Jordan, he must work. If Atsuko, unlike Rintaro who claims not to trust their new friends, is taken in by the charm of the seemingly free-flowing alcohol and ukulele songs performed around an open fire at Garbo's party, Cory is not really part of this world. If Atsuko and Rintaro are passing through, like the train and also like Jordan and his mobile friends (Jordan is planning on going to New York; Brody, Garbo and Marques, meanwhile, drive around in a car), then Cory is not—and notably it is by foot and not by "vintage" bike (with obligatory "chopper" handlebars) that he shows his Japanese guests around.

Hipsterism is thus revealed to be a form of cultural tourism, a chosen and empowered lifestyle as opposed to one that is the result of necessity. Less overtly masculine than the heteronormative style of Brody and friends (who also hurl racist abuse at Francisco from their car at one point), Jordan's hipster style may be charming, but it is also revealed ultimately as shallow and exploitative. Atsuko discovers as much when towards the film's end she spies Jordan cheating on her. But what Atsuko truly learns is a more profound truth than even this. When she decides to stay, it is Cory who takes Atsuko in. Living with Cory and his father (Ivor Falk) is hardly glamorous, as Atsuko is invited to share microwave meals from a plastic tray and also starts doing shifts in the diner run by Cory's father, where she meets Francisco. However, it is perhaps through this brief spell of work and an understanding of Cory and Francisco's relative poverty that Atsuko is able in some senses to understand her own family history, as expressed through the visit to Manzanar.

For as one passes through a landscape, one does not really get to know it. It is only through stasis that the real landscape reveals itself. That is, Jordan and Brody's male privilege and empowerment to travel is built upon Francisco's work, and in some ways on Cory's (try as Cory might to escape work and to become a model, an actor and a poet). More than this, it is only through acknowledging the eradication of the Native American population, alluded to in the trinket shop at the film's opening, and the internment of the Japanese POWs that we can similarly begin to understand the basis of U.S. power. The ruined building, desert and military range all signal the history of violence upon which this nation is based and the ongoing necessity for that violence in order for the national landscape as cinematic image to be maintained. Passing through the landscape, one will not see this, experiencing instead a romantic attachment akin to limerence. But a real relationship that is more reliable than limerence must involve seeing past the hipster façade and understanding that Cory and Francisco are in effect the new population interned in the desert, which Atsuko learns by sharing their lifestyle. Stuck there rather than passing through, Cory and Francisco live in a way that contrasts with Jordan and his friends' lives. Experiencing this, rather than herself simply passing through, is what allows Atsuko more profoundly to understand her own family history, even if it lies outside of cinema because cinema itself involves a logic not of stasis but of empowered movement as images constantly pass through the projector.

Cory produces an experimental video on VHS—not as a hipster move but as expression through the only medium that he has at his disposal. In it he asks, "What am I supposed to do now? What am I supposed to be? Am I not a poet?" From the perspective of cinema, Cory is not a poet. Or if he is a poet, he is a "bad" one, as implied by the pained look that a curator offers as he watches the video when Cory submits it for an upcoming show at a local gallery. But like Leigh as a filmmaker in *Kid Icarus*, Ott suggests that Cory in some senses is a poet, especially when his video is accepted into the show and shown at the gallery. He is not in Los Angeles as per his wishes, but he nonetheless is an artist in a small way, and perhaps a better artist for it.

For just as Jordan cheats and Brody, Garbo and Marques are racists, mainstream society is revealed as exploitative and violent. Cory, meanwhile, finds himself part of a small community that in some sense is bound together by Atsuko as she discovers his worth. For Atsuko also has work accepted into the exhibition, in particular a portrait of Cory that bears the title "Littlerock." "Damn, I really could be a model," says Cory as he observes the drawing, hope restored to his life through art, even if only in a small way. And even though Cory argues with Francisco, who mocks Cory for seeming gay, Atsuko also draws Francisco into this community when she leaves him a necklace that she buys in the trinket store that we saw at the film's opening. Even though neither Cory nor Atsuko nor Francisco (who speaks only Spanish) have a common

language, they are bound together by stasis, which in turn ties them to the landscape, which in turn gives them a deeper understanding of history and the true, violent basis of the United States, which is linked to the performance of hipster and macho masculinities. Imperfect (not the least because Cory struggles to get on with black people, who are absent from the film except in the form of the bully Marques), nonetheless a tentative if "uncinematic" community is found on the margins of the mainstream. Perhaps this community is more meaningful than a romantic relationship founded on limerence. In this way, Cory and Atsuko do not fall in love before the desert landscape but at least become friends. One might read the final moments of the film, in which Atsuko and Cory speak on the phone without understanding each other (Atsuko says in Japanese that Cory is a good person while Cory describes Atsuko as his only friend) as a sign of failure or a lack of connection. But in fact both characters—talking not on smartphones but using a landline—have bonded, not in spite of but perhaps *because* of that failure.

Pearblossom Hwy

Named after the main road that passes through Littlerock and Lancaster, the town in which it is set, *Pearblossom Hwy* explores various issues that build upon the situation depicted in *LiTTLEROCK*. Okatsuka this time plays Anna, not a tourist but a Japanese student who turns to prostitution in order to make enough money to visit her dying grandmother in her homeland. Zacharia again plays Cory, who in this film is in a punk band called Cory and the Corrupts, and who dreams of being on a reality television show. Cory has an uneasy relationship with his former Marine brother, Jeff. Jeff comes home to hang out with Cory before they decide to travel to San Francisco both for a visit to the grave of their dead mother and for Cory to meet for the first time his otherwise absent father, Rick (Stephen Tobolowsky), who rejects him.

In other words, the journey into the past is this time not Anna's but Cory's, as Cory, Jeff and Anna form another unlikely and makeshift community/family. While exploring similar themes to *LiTTLEROCK*, however, *Pearblossom Hwy* is in some respects a darker and more violent film than its predecessor. This is also made clear by Ott's signally more aggressive editing style, which regularly employs Jean-Luc Godard-style gunshot sounds to accompany cuts and rapid montages. If in the earlier film Jordan's exploitation of Atsuko demonstrates a continuation of the U.S. imperialist exploitation of others, as per the exclusion of Japanese-American citizens via internment at Manzanar, here sexual relations no longer enjoy the veneer of romance via limerence but instead are uniquely transactional and violent. That Anna is a student working as a prostitute and hoping to travel suggests that love has been corrupted, with education no longer contributing to community building but instead necessitating entry into capital simultaneously via prostitution and becoming cinema—with all three being linked figuratively in the sense that prostitution involves woman as an image to make money (as opposed to a human being whom a man might desire), and in the literal sense that one of Anna's regular clients, also a Japanese man (played again by Rintaro Sawamoto), films his encounters with her. The character's situation is also linked to transportation and the infrastructure of the country as Anna on various occasions goes looking for clients at truck stops. If Jordan's ability to travel is in *LiTTLEROCK* linked to his exploitative take on relationships, here the enabling infrastructure of the country (transport networks bringing us commodities) is also tied to sexual exploitation.

Furthermore, if the presence of the military range in *LiTTLEROCK* is suggestive of how the country is built upon violence, so is Jeff's work as a marine. Indeed, soon after returning, Jeff chastizes Cory for not having a job, describing his own military experiences as "shitty" and saying that he was protecting Cory's "right not to do shit." In other words, Jeff feels exploited as a result of his immediate impression that Cory is wasting his life with a relatively talentless if energetic punk band, one that no doubt irks Jeff when Cory sings lines like "I will not conform to this fucking country"—as if his work for the marines were a waste of time.

However, as Atsuko learns kinship with Cory and Francisco in the earlier film, so Jeff learns kinship with his brother in *Pearblossom Hwy*. In one scene, Jeff steps outside a Lancaster dive bar for a smoke and looks around: "Man, there's nothing here," he says, signalling his burgeoning understanding of Cory's situation, that Cory is not so much wasting his life and exploiting the efforts of the military as Cory has no life in Lancaster to waste. Indeed, given his work with the band, Cory is in some senses creatively engaging with the lack of opportunities in Lancaster, where a refusal to conform does not mean rejecting work but making art where there is no work. By this rationale, Cory was not just irrational when he lost his driver's license with a DUI, rendering him immobile; that act was also the logical extension of a total lack of mobility where he lives.

In what can perhaps be read as a continuation of his video art piece in *LiTTLEROCK*, *Pearblossom Hwy* opens with Cory recording himself on what appears to be a smartphone ("I really wish sometimes I were a better person"). He's also aspiring to get on television. However, although he hopes to be or to become cinematic, he's frustrated in his efforts. This is made especially clear when Cory gets to San Francisco. There, one sequence shows Cory and Anna going on an almost impossible tour around the city, travelling in only a few minutes of screen time from one end of San Francisco to the other, taking in cliff-top vistas, a record store, a flea market, a bus ride, a trip to the movies (to see what looks like Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid*, 1921) and to see the architecture of a city that is the setting for Alfred Hitchcock's most celebrated rumination on cinema and desire, *Vertigo* (1958). In other words, San Francisco becomes a kind of cinematic fantasy space for Cory, replete with a derelict area covered in graffiti where he and Anna hang out briefly, thereby demonstrating the city's "alternative" credentials. Having finally become cinema/cinematic in the city, though, the illusion does not last . We see Cory picked on by a stand-up comedienne (Shawn Pelofsky), who mocks him for his band, his TV aspirations, and for claiming that Lancaster lies in Los Angeles. Cory really did know that Lancaster could not be further from LA, in many ways. But his claim that they are the same place was based more upon his desire for this to be so rather than physical reality. The comedienne continues by asking Cory what he does in Lancaster—"if there's anything besides trying not to kill yourself." And with this question, the comedienne casts Cory out of his cinematic San Francisco moment and back into his uncinematic life.

Rather than abandon his brother, Jeff learns instead to understand and by extension to love him. Nonetheless, he objects violently to Cory's making an impression as a "faggot," dragging him from a bar where another guy (Ryan Dillon) seems to be trying to pick Cory up shortly after the stand-up show.[15] If homosexuality remains another form of "right not to do shit," though, Jeff again comes to realize that Cory is a man who has grown up without a father. As Cory himself asks:

> "How do you act straight? How do you act gay? How do you act like a girl? How do you act like a guy? How do you act like a man? How do you act like a man when there's not a man

around?"

Without a model to follow, it is not that Cory is straight or gay; he is, rather, himself. And if in his lack of performance, Cory is revealed as uncinematic and by extension incomprehensible to others, including his brother who has defended the cinematic values of the nation by serving in the military, then Cory is equally freed from cinematic illusions. As Jeff himself admits to Anna:

> "Cory should be happy that he [Rick] wants nothing to do with him. He's a shit for a dad."

Here we have a linguistic link between the "shitty" military, a "shit" father and Cory's inability to "do shit" (thereby revealing that the mainstream cinematic society that Cory cannot join is, precisely, shit!). We also see Jeff acknowledging Cory's freedom. Rick briefly performs fatherhood for Cory, telling him a bad joke about a guy who wastes a second wish from a leprechaun by asking for a second, self-refilling cup of beer. Cory then repeats the joke as he, Jeff and Anna drive back from San Francisco to Lancaster—except that Cory botches the re-telling. Having been shown by his so-called father how to act like a man, Cory in some senses refuses to do so, not least because meeting his father, contrary to expectations, "really wasn't that interesting." In other words, Cory does not and cannot perform a cinematic masculinity. Indeed, he is in many ways not a performer and in this way eludes cinema.

And it is precisely at this moment that Ott's film transitions into an interview not with Cory the character, but with Cory the actor, whom Ott asks in voice off not about Cory's "dad in the movie," but his "dad in real life." Cory replies by explaining how his father cooks meth and does not acknowledge Cory as his son, about which Cory is not unhappy, "because I don't feel like he's my dad." Bereft of a father and failing to perform, Cory is outside of cinema, perhaps even the social real. But while he fails to perform, Cory also performs failure, and in the process brings to cinema its outside. This outside is paradoxically cinematic and uncinematic at the same time, a non-cinematic real upon which cinema is built, much like the invisible labor upon which the nation is built. If the traditional family is also erected upon violence and exclusion, then it is in his new, makeshift family/community with Anna and Jeff that Cory will survive. Jeff learns not that Cory is exploiting him but that Cory and Anna both are exploited like him for the purposes of constructing a cinematic nation. And if the nation as cinema is built upon violence, then Ott's repeated gunshot cuts remind us of the violence of cinema itself, reminding us constantly that we are watching a film rather than allowing us to slip into a comfortable viewing position from which the violence of cinema is occluded.

Lake Los Angeles

On their way to San Francisco, Cory, Jeff and Anna stop at the house of Jeff's fellow former marine, Alejandro Fumero (Roberto Sanchez). Alejandro explains that since his return from the military, he has been having a hard time getting a job, taking up odd jobs as a painter rather than finding regular work. In other words, like Cory, Alejandro lives outside mainstream society. However, when Alejandro and Anna later smoke a cigarette together outside his house, Anna explains that she is thinking about skipping her citizenship exam and instead using the money to travel back to Japan. Anna's possible status as an American is linked to prostitution, and Alejandro's status as an American is equally linked to his time in the military. That is, both learn that to be an American is to be exploited, with prostitution and the military in effect being parallel careers. Alejandro explains that he arrived in the United States from Cuba as part of Operation Peter Pan, in which 14,000 Cuban children were flown here between 1960 and 1962 presumably to help families seeking to leave Fidel Castro's newly-established Communist country. "This country [the USA] has given me everything," says Alejandro, before explaining how his mother sacrificed "everything for me to be here"—even though he never saw her again. Without a family, Alejandro has nonetheless found life in this country, and while he may be exploited, he is nonetheless more "cinematic" here than he would be in Cuba.

Pearblossom Hwy does not criticize Alejandro for loving his adopted nation, but his inability to escape precarity in his post-military life would suggest that he's not been fully incorporated into or cared for within U.S. society (perhaps because the American system is founded upon a lack of care for its citizens as well as upon the military and violence). But while Alejandro has achieved some integration as a result of his military experience, the same is not true of Francisco in *Lake Los Angeles*, where Sanchez once again plays a Cuban illegal immigrant called Francisco, as per his role in *LiTTLEROCK*.

Lake Los Angeles is the most overtly political of the Antelope Valley trilogy in terms of its storyline. It depicts the parallel and briefly overlapping lives of Francisco, who makes a living taking odd jobs and by looking after a holding house for other immigrants trafficked into California from across the Mexican border, and Cecilia (Johanna Trujillo), a 10-year old Mexican girl who arrives in Lake Los Angeles without a family. On the verge of being sold into sexual slavery, Cecilia escapes into the desert. The film then follows the way in which the American dream proves to be nothing other than a dream for both Francisco and Cecilia in their respective lives—until they reunite at the film's end. In particular, *Lake Los Angeles* makes use of haunting desert imagery in order to convey how its geographical setting is nothing like Los Angeles, nor even a lake anymore. Indeed, at a time when California is undergoing severe water shortages, *Lake Los Angeles* seems to express the hidden desertification of the area, which runs counter to the image of an opulent LA that we see in more mainstream films. Indeed, the lack of water seems directly linked to Francisco's lack of work opportunities; the literal drought is accompanied by an economic drought, and the desert emerges therefore as not just a feature of geology but also of socioeconomics.

Aeroplanes fly far overhead as Cecilia wanders the desert, reminding us of how tourists and the rich easily travel internationally in an era when the poor conversely struggle to move across borders, especially into the United States and what is regularly referred to as Fortress Europe. To a seemingly greater extent than in his other films, here Ott develops a more expressive cinematographic style. As Cecilia and Francisco both are shown repeatedly walking through and contemplating the desert, we begin to see them not so much "against" the desert as a backdrop, as with or part of the desert. In particular, the film focuses on trees growing in the desert, with Cecilia drawing and using as a geographical marker one particular tree that helps her to find her way back to Francisco. Thus it is not that these *chicano* characters are "like the desert," but perhaps are much like these trees—somehow defiantly growing out of and fused with this otherwise supposedly barren land. Wind turbines suggesting the air, open fires, the desert earth, and a special emphasis on Cecilia finding water lend to the film an elemental dimension, already there in the other films, more pronounced here.

Bearing in mind a history of Chicano cinema, in which the U.S. Latino population, both legal and not, has

been represented and has represented itself, the fusing of these Hispanic characters with the elements, with the desert and with nature potentially runs the risk of "essentializing" them.[16] For example, consider the role of animals in the film. *Lake Los Angeles* opens with an image of a foggy desert road illuminated by advancing car headlights as Cecilia recounts in voice over a story in which a lost man who is tired and hungry finds a rabbit that offers itself to him as food. In return for this favor, the man carves the image of the rabbit into the moon so that they remain always together. Meanwhile, Francisco describes himself as looking after wounded animals, while Cecilia also finds and regularly brings food to a dog that she calls Panchito. Such moments lend a potentially problematic component of mythologizing to Ott's film, in that it seems to connect "natural" and "honest" Hispanic characters with the non-human world of animals and the landscape.

However, the almost exclusively Hispanic population of *Lake Los Angeles* also includes Adria (Eloy Méndez), who carries out the trafficking runs, and a store worker (Corina Calderon) who threatens to report Cecilia for shoplifting. That is, *Lake Los Angeles* is not one-dimensional in its portrayal of Hispanic characters, but instead shows a range of different characters, with Adria leading Francisco on a failed attempt to steal some money from others in the trafficking network. Remarkable for being almost entirely in Spanish, even if *Lake Los Angeles* notably involves much less talking than the other films in the Antelope Valley trilogy (Cory talks almost incessantly), the "fusion" of Cecilia and Francisco (rather than all Hispanics) with the landscape serves to highlight once again the way in which the nation is based upon the contributions of these characters. In other words, they learn to become part of the land rather than "naturally" take up this role, and this comes about because of their exclusion from mainstream society (the United States is built upon exploitation; in being exploited, they see the "real" America). And in this, they are not alone as Cecilia encounters a white homeless man who also wanders the desert—even if the homeless man never specifically sees Cecilia and even if they never talk. The implied kinship demonstrated between Cecilia, Francisco, the homeless man, the animals and the desert instead conveys something far more functional and less mythic/romantic. That is, as they need fire for warmth and water to drink, so too do they "merge" with their surroundings in order to survive in them, developing whatever relationships they can for this purpose. It is not that stoically they suffer in silence; there literally is no one for these characters to talk with. Indeed, shy of an interlocutor, Cecilia instead talks to the *viejito*/old man that lives inside a snow globe that she has brought with her from south of the border. While the snow globe functions metaphorically in the film on more than one level, as I shall discuss below, for her to invest it with an ability to listen and to hear is not simply her childish fetishization as it is a mechanism for coping with solitude.

The film's cinematography repeatedly features lens flare, in particular in shots featuring Cecilia and Francisco. The effect of the lens flare is that not only are Cecilia and Francisco "fused" with the landscape, but that the status of this "fusion" is consciously acknowledged *as an image*. The lens flare by extension also "fuses" the viewer with the image, in that the viewer cannot simply observe these characters in a detached fashion but is implicated in the filmmaking process by virtue of this self-conscious artefact. Such cinematography gives a sense of Francisco and Cecilia as constructed images (the lens flare makes the presence of the camera visible) but it does not necessarily render them "cinematic," such that they are included in society. For rather than allowing us to see these characters, the lens flare also partially *obscures* and renders invisible that which features in the frame (it is the lens flare itself that dominates the frame). This means that the lives of people like Cecilia and Francisco are partially and paradoxically obscured by light, suggesting that they are invisible to mainstream society.

And yet, via their respective journeys from Cuba and Mexico, Francisco and Cecilia alike seek a more cinematic life, as is made clear by the film's intertextual references. That Cecilia talks to a snow globe can only bring to mind *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), in which a snow globe functions as a reminder for Charles Foster Kane (Welles) of his childhood in the Colorado mountains. As in *Kane*, the snow globe represents an impossible and lost past, namely Cecilia's life with her parents, from whom she has been separated and who will not join her in the USA, in spite of their promise to do so. Where in *Kane*, the snow globe smashes as Kane drops it on the point of death while uttering the famous word "Rosebud," in *Lake Los Angeles* the snow globe is smashed when unknown people enter into and spend time in the dilapidated desert shack where Cecilia hides. If the smashing of the snow globe marks Kane's death, Cecilia lives on—but perhaps only because as an illegal immigrant she is in some senses "already dead" (or non-existent, because invisible) within the United States. Although Kane and Cecilia share a separation from their family, their destinies are completely different.

The irony of this shared cinematic destiny is suggested through another intertextual reference—to John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). In that film, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) is famously seen through a doorframe stepping out into the desert after having rescued his niece (Natalie Wood) from the Comanche. An iconic image, it also marks Edwards' obsolescence in the West; violent and racist figures like him might be necessary for getting done the job of creating the (imperialist) nation, but they are soon discarded once more genteel lives can be led. In *Lake Los Angeles*, meanwhile, Cecilia steps out into the desert from a dilapidated shack. The desert here is not conquered, but rather has reclaimed the old homestead. The reference to *The Searchers* might once again suggest that Cecilia has become cinematic. But in "fusing" with the desert as opposed to conquering it, the shot also suggests Cecilia's ongoing outsider status. In this respect she perhaps *is* like Edwards. As Edwards through his violence helps to establish the country, only to be rejected from it because of his violent ways, so is Cecilia and the rest of the Hispanic immigrant workforce essential to the running of the country, even if she and that workforce more generally are summarily excluded from the nation as they are excluded from its cinema.

Cecilia is without a family—as suggested by a third intertextual reference, which is the repeated use of Jeanette's 1974 song, "¿Por qué te vas?," which also is played repeatedly in *Cría cuervos/Raise Ravens* (1976), Carlos Saura's film about a young girl (Ana Torrent) whose parents are both dead. Perhaps the presence of Jeanette's song on the film's soundtrack suggests that Cecilia's parents have met a similar fate.[17] Meanwhile, Francisco is also without family, receiving a letter towards the end of *Lake Los Angeles*, in which his wife Claudia (Laimarie Serrano) breaks off her relationship with him. Writing letters (as opposed to emails) and listening to vinyl records (as opposed to digital listening), Francisco is not using old media because he is a hipster, but because he does not fit into the contemporary world. Nonetheless, he does forge a new family of sorts via his kinship with Cecilia, who at the film's end arrives at his house having survived her time in the desert. Notably, as Atsuko presents Francisco with a necklace in *LiTTLEROCK*, so does Cecilia do the same with Francisco here, thereby confirming their new if inconventional bond.

Actor Martinez

Ott's next film saw him move to Denver to work with Nathan Silver on this complex movie that nonetheless is also an investigation into cinema and the cinematic. As mentioned earlier, Arthur is an actor, but he makes ends meet by working as a computer repairman. He drinks heavily and is almost constantly stoned. *Actor Martinez* opens with a long take, mainly out of focus, in which Mike and Nathan discuss their notes about how to work with Arthur for the film. From the outset then, the film is self-consciously about making a film, as repeatedly we see the directors and the actors sat drinking (from "hipster" jars) at a table discussing their thoughts on what seem to be that day's rushes. At one point, the film continues across takes as Arthur breaks character at the end of one take, only to go back into character in the new take. In other words, *Actor Martinez* does not hide the artifice that goes into its own making but rather wholly embraces it.

As discussed, if cinema involves the occultation of its own making, then in some senses *Actor Martinez* is not cinema. And yet, like Leigh in *Kid Icarus*, Arthur's desire to be an actor is driven by his desire for visibility and thus his desire for empowerment within a capitalist and cinematic society. The importance of visibility is made clear when Arthur discusses his preference for Lindsay Burdge as his co-star because she is "a name" (i.e. has appeared in films before) and thus adds "marketability" to the film (not that directors Mike and Nathan want this).[18] Furthermore, the "cinematic" nature of contemporary U.S. society is also suggested when Arthur and Kenneth (Kenneth Berba) use their acting skills to train police officers; the law itself is a performance as much as anything else.

That said, while *Actor Martinez* explores the aspiration to be or become cinematic, it also firmly takes place within an increasingly digital world, where cinema is perhaps anachronistic. Arthur enters into people's homes to repair their computers; on various occasions we also see the inhabitants of those homes either watching television or, more pointedly, playing videogames. Arthur is invisible to these people—he's not a human being to them but a service provider. The digital age here consists of people who do not communicate or form communities; instead they exist in an isolated state sold to them. As a "new" medium, the computer nonetheless shares various characteristics with cinema, including the making-invisible of its inner workings. Most (relatively well off) users of computers do not know—nor do they seemingly want to know—how those computers function; their workings, like the workings of capital and of cinema alike, are thus (wilfully) invisible to us. For this reason, Arthur is ignored by those whom he visits: they do not want to see work being carried out, nor to pay attention to the fact that before them a Latino is making possible their participation in digital-era capitalist society. Perhaps it is not surprising that Arthur also begins to refer to himself as if he were a computer, suggesting that he needs a "reboot" (a term that has of course been co-opted by the movie industry to refer to the recycling of pre-existing cinematic material).

In seeking to become cinematic, though, Arthur as a human being paradoxically disappears from view during the course of this film named for him. Who is Arthur Martinez? And why has he been replaced by *Actor* Martinez? Constantly *Actor Martinez* shows us Arthur framed in mirrors and other reflective surfaces. To become an image/to become cinematic may grant entry into capitalist society (to be visible connotes success and wealth as attention is economized), and yet Arthur "himself" disappears from view.

The film takes on at its core the directors' desire to get Arthur to cry. They plan a re-enactment of him ending his relationship with Lindsay—evoking memories of his supposedly real split from his wife before the film begins. The directors do not succeed, with Lindsay even improvising at one point (or so it seems) to say that Arthur (the actor or the character?) never really shows any emotions but is/was always performing. Like a machine, she says, Arthur cannot cry—and his failing is dressed up specifically in the language of performative patriarchy as Arthur declares that "it is not a guy's role to cry." Like an empty image, Arthur cannot reveal anything real—with Mike also accusing Arthur of never saying anything that has any meaning. If *Pearblossom Hwy* ends with Cory failing to perform and thus taking us outside of acting, outside of cinema and into the realm of the real, with Arthur we realize that he contains only layer upon layer of acting, and that thus there is for Arthur only cinema. If Arthur refuses to share anything real, however, *Actor Martinez* as a film insists upon exposing that cinema is empty, hence its hyper-self-consciousness as we see the directors directing the film.

Specifically the patriarchal nature of cinema (and of the cinematic society) is exposed when the filmmakers ask Arthur and Lindsay without warning to perform a sex scene, with Mike specifically asking her from off camera if she will go topless. Since Burdge is "a name," *Actor Martinez* reminds us of the objectification of women (and perhaps of film stars more generally). *Actor Martinez* does not get around this, but it does highlight it by exposing the patriarchal nature of the filmmaking process, specifically in this scene, in which Mike's direction is not hidden but instead made explicitly clear (at least on the film's soundtrack as we hear Mike talk from off screen). In other words, the film exposes the patriarchal mechanisms of filmmaking, and by extension of capital, again reinforcing a sense that *Actor Martinez* is somehow not cinema. The seemingly improvised aspects of the film would suggest something similar—a desire to get away from a script and to produce a film that in the process escapes cinema as pre-scripted performance ("none of this film is about prep," sighs a fatigued Arthur at one point).

At the film's end, Arthur explains how recently he has been listening to Eminem (we see two short bursts during the film of Arthur rapping along to the musician in his car). From Eminem he has learned that perhaps one needs to expose one's failures and say "bad stuff" about oneself in order to achieve something meaningful. But Ott and Silver seem less interested in capturing a performance of failure than in pushing Arthur towards a failure of performance, to a point where he no longer can perform. This is not for Arthur merely to admit or to expose "bad" stuff but to reach a point where cinema breaks down (and where it becomes hard to tell fiction apart from documentary). *Actor Martinez* is thus an exercise in honesty, but an honesty about the performative nature of honesty itself. In posing but not resolving questions about this topic, *Actor Martinez* in some senses becomes a film in which nothing happens. And yet *Actor Martinez* also sees the creation of a community and the creation of a film. Its failure is in some respects its very success; in existing, *Actor Martinez* challenges conventional (capitalist) definitions of what cinema is or can be. It thus paradoxically proves the coming-into-existence of the previously-non-existent, the reality of capital's outside, in that there is or can be a world outside of capital, since capital is not fixed and eternal, but rather contingent and possible to change.

California Dreams

With their self-conscious and performative dimensions, Ott's films reinforce in the contemporary era the ongoing need for what Gilles Deleuze would term time-images: images of another time that is not our own, which allows us to contemplate therefore that the world might be different. Cinema is put to paradoxical work in expressing what lies beyond the typical purview of a reality defined precisely by cinema, or in which only the cinematic is considered real.[19] If Ott tries to drive Cory and Arthur to the point of failing to perform, then in certain respects his cinema does the same. He seeks not to repeat what we already see in other films (to make clichés), even if his films involve savvy intertextual references. And he does not put forward an "accelerationist" approach to cinema, whereby he would ramp up the cinematic in order to try to break cinema, even if *Actor Martinez* comes closest to this.

Nor is it that Ott's cinema is a "slow" cinema that deliberately goes against the fast pace of the contemporary world. Even if Cory is stuck in Antelope Valley, the films themselves nonetheless maintain a regular cutting speed, involving a camera that is sometimes mobile, sometimes not. Instead Ott's work is perhaps somewhere in between these two positions, stylistically close to conventional cinema as Antelope Valley is geographically close to Hollywood—and yet somehow worlds apart. Having gone to Denver to work with Silver on *Actor Martinez*, Ott has not gone on to make bigger movies as might be expected (and follow the career trajectories of other mumblecore directors). Instead, Ott makes small movies that are defiantly small. He loyally returns to Antelope Valley and to Cory Zacharia for his latest film, *California Dreams*, in which Cory, too, seems to pass up his opportunity to become cinematic and to work on director Gronkowski's film in Germany, even though Cory has been saying since *Pearblossom Hwy* that he wants to go to Europe (London in that film; in *California Dreams* Cory wants to visit Finland).

But is Ott beginning merely to repeat himself, to become clichéd and turn his failures of performance into performances of failure? It could be argued that this is so. However, while Cory is still in Lancaster looking for a job—we see him here struggle with the computers that Arthur Martinez navigates so easily as he tries to put together a CV to find work—in other ways Cory has changed. The differences are slight but significant: Cory now has conversations in cars, albeit that they are parked and going nowhere. He discusses his sexual experiences, including homosexual ones, with a character played by John Brotherton and who could thus be his brother Jeff from *Pearblossom Hwy*. Cory also talks with Patrick about the latter's lack of sexual experience before taking him to a prostitute. The prostitute is not Anna/Atsuko but a blonde white woman (Jeanie Marie Sullivan), whom Cory and Patrick watch as she dances in slow motion. Has Cory become an exploiter of bodies after himself being exploited? Is this something that he has learned from Francisco, who in *Lake Los Angeles* also offers himself moments of cinema by visiting strippers? Or are these fantasy sequences, like the taxi ride at the end, in which these would-be cinematic moments cover over how Cory and Patrick are anything but cinematic? It is not entirely clear, but in coming back to Cory, Ott perhaps presents to us an image of change, a 21st century American Antoine Doinel who still dreams of becoming cinema, but who still somehow cannot make it.

What is more, Cory is still not alone. Not only does the film contain Patrick, but also others trying to find their way into and/or dream about being in the movies, including would-be screenwriter Neil (Neil Harley); K-Nine (Kevin Gilger), who models himself on bounty hunter Duane "Dog" Chapman; and Carolan (Carol Anne Lombardi). The latter in particular presents to us a heartbreaking story of a woman who dreams of winning an Oscar for a film based upon her own life living in a car for two years. We see her Oscar fantasy play out in a motel room much like the sequence with the stripper. The car may represent mobility, but for Carolan it is also all that she has (she describes the vehicle as her "salvation" and her "prison"). K-Nine meanwhile plays a police officer/bounty hunter of sorts; he sporadically turns up to arrest Cory. Cory sits in cars and talks with each of these characters. New communities are thus created, as at the film's end Cory walks past them all at a motel before getting into the taxi with Mark Borchardt. Of course, Cory's audition VHS sees him reciting lines from *The Outsiders* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1983). With his community of friends, Cory is part of independent U.S. cinema's new fragile band of outsiders, precariously existing on the margins of and perhaps even outside of cinema.

"You're on the new frontier. You're definitely exploring new territory," says Mark to Cory as the latter describes his plans to visit Europe. But Ott does not have to visit Europe. He is able to find a new frontier right here on the old frontier, a new territory right here in the old territory. He does this by exploring the failure of performance and by making small form films that are about the territory and those who inhabit it, as opposed to those who simply exploit it and pass on through. May Ott's films get ever smaller yet.

Notes

1. See Richard Brody, "The Best Movies of 2017," *The New Yorker*, December 8 2017, accessed December 11 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/2017-in-review/the-best-movies-of-2017. [return to text]

2. Yannis Tzioumakis, *Hollywood's Indies: Classics Divisions, Specialty Labels and the American Film Market* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 194. See also Chuck Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 116-119.

3. David Church, "'Propane is the Pussies': *Bellflower*'s bromance of retro technology and hip masculinity," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 55 (Fall 2013), accessed December 11 2017, https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc55.2013/ChurchBellflower/.

4. Aymar Jean Christian, "Joe Swanberg, Intimacy, and the Digital Aesthetic," *Cinema Journal*, 50, no. 4 (Summer 2011): 135.

5. Maria San Filippo, "A Cinema of Recession: Micro-Budgeting, Micro-Drama, and the 'Mumblecore' Movement," *Cineaction*, 85 (2011), accessed July 27 2015, http://www.cineaction.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/issue85sample1.pdf.

6. Church, "'Propane is the Pussies.'"

7. Anna Backman Rogers, *American Independent Cinema: Rites of Passage and the Crisis Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 122.

8. See Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Lebanon, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2006).

9. For more on the concept of non-cinema, including in relation to Giuseppe Andrews, see William Brown, "Non-Cinema: Digital, Ethics, Multitude," *Film-Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2016): 104-130.

10. Mike Ott (n.d.) "*Analog Days* (2006) Plot Summary," *Internet Movie Database*, accessed August 10 2015, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0801819/plotsummary?ref_=tt_ov_pl.

11. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, translated by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

12. The phrase "pushing carts" cannot help but recall—even if inadvertently—Ramin Bahrani's seering critique of immigrant labor in *Man Push Cart* (2005). In some senses, Bahrani is a filmmaker with whom Ott has a lot in common, not least their concern for labor.

13. Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (Göttingen: European Photography, 1984), 10.

14. Mike Hale, "Young Tourists Marooned in a California Town," *The New York Times*, August 11 2011, accessed August 10 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/12/movies/littlerock-directed-by-mike-ott-review.html?_r=0.

15. The casting of Dillon in this small role as a seeming homosexual runs counter to his masculine image as Brody in *LiTTLEROCK*. Perhaps Ott is pointing gently towards the unstable sexuality of even the most "masculine" characters in his cinematic universe.

16. For a classic study of *chicano* cinema, see Chon A. Noriega, *Chicanos and Film: Essays on Chicano Representation and Resistance* (New York: Garland, 1992).

17. I first became aware of Mike Ott's films at the 2011 CPH PIX Film Festival in Copenhagen, Denmark, where there was a retrospective of Ott's first three films (*Analog Days*, *Kid Icarus* and *LiTTLEROCK*). Also showing at that festival was *Afterimages* (2010), a micro-budget film directed by William Brown—also the author of the essay on non-cinema referenced above. *Afterimages*, which tells the story of a Guatemalan baker living in Scotland (Dennis Chua) and who develops an uneasy relationship with a much younger woman (Flossie Topping), also features Jeanette's "¿Por qué te vas?" at various points on the soundtrack. Perhaps *Lake Los Angeles* is channelling both Saura's and Brown's films as Ott explores how Cecilia and Francisco both exist outside of cinema, or "after images." Although this insight is somewhat speculative, it is supported by the fact that both filmmakers were present at the festival and thus quite possibly met.

18. The inclusion of Burdge in *Actor Martinez* perhaps makes the film the most "mumblecore" of Ott's work, in that Burdge is associated with the movement via parts in Noah Baumbach's *Frances Ha* (2012) and Joe Swanberg's *All the Light in the Sky* (2012) and *Digging for Fire* (2015).

19. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Continuum, 2005).